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Weinberger Says Arms Gap With Soviets Is Narrowing, but Opposes Defense Cuts

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WASHINGTON—Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger conceded that the Soviet Union's military edge over the U.S. is diminishing, but he contended that cuts in defense spending could widen the gap again.

Kicking off a new Reagan administration campaign to highlight the armed threat from Moscow, Mr. Weinberger briefly departed from his usual theme of massive Soviet superiority to say "we have begun to catch up . . . I think that we have begun to close the gap."

But he quickly stressed that the Soviets have continued to increase their own forces, albeit probably a bit more slowly than in the past. Thus, he argued, proposals currently gaining in Congress to trim President Reagan's \$239 billion fiscal 1984 military spending request would delay the time when the U.S. could catch up.

The centerpiece of the new campaign is a

revised edition of the 1981 Pentagon publication, "Soviet Military Power," in which the U.S. government made public much previously secret data about Soviet arms. The latest volume, a slick 107-page document packed with charts and photos, is more detailed than its predecessor and paints a picture of a gigantic Soviet military machine, primed for war against the West.

The new book, however, also reflects recent U.S. intelligence conclusions that the rate of Soviet weapons production is slowing in important areas.

Some Central Intelligence Agency analysts contend that Soviet military spending is rising at a rate of 2% to 3% a year rather than the 3% to 5% previously estimated. Mr. Weinberger, however, said the production slowdown simply reflects the changeover in Soviet arms plants to new model weapons, and the Pentagon predicts the production pace will pick up again soon.

Pentagon officials said this slowdown in the rate of Soviet weapons production, plus sharp increases in the past two years in U.S. defense spending, have combined to produce the narrowed gap Mr. Weinberger cited at his news conference yesterday.

But the thrust of the new book, and of public and private news briefings connected with its release, is that Moscow is building an awesome military potential to gain world domination.

Perhaps the most interesting disclosure, which isn't printed in the book, is that U.S. intelligence believes the U.S.S.R. has amassed 8,650 nuclear weapons for delivery by intercontinental missiles and bombers, roughly the same number held by the U.S. For years, the total number of intercontinental nuclear weapons was the only measure of overall strategic strength in which the U.S. led. As recently as 1979, the Pentagon said the U.S. had 9,200 such weapons to 5,000 for the U.S.S.R.

Among the other developments cited were these:

—The Soviets are testing a giant new bomber, 24% larger than the U.S. B-1, called the Blackjack.

—Moscow has tested two new intercontinental ballistic missiles in recent months, and will soon test two more.

—Soviet factories have turned out 1,900 tanks of the new T-80 class, while the U.S.'s comparable M-1 tanks are being built at a much slower rate.

—The Soviets are building a copy of the U.S. space shuttle, and are preparing to launch, in the next 10 years, military space stations, space-based laser weapons and space-based anti-ballistic missiles.

—Three giant new classes of nuclear submarines are being turned out at Soviet shipyards and further classes are being designed.

—About a dozen new Soviet army divisions have been created in just the past 18 months, though most aren't fully ready for combat.

Some 300,000 copies of the new book are being sent to editors, civic leaders and others here and abroad. The president, meanwhile, is expected to deliver a nationally televised speech soon on Soviet arms to defend his defense-spending request.